

## MCA backs brucellosis 'split state'

By SCOTT McMILLION Chronicle Staff Writer

LIVINGSTON — Most ranchers in this part of the state have spoken harshly of Gov. Brian Schweitzer's plans to create a "split state" category for brucellosis control.

However, one statewide ranching group approved a measure last week saying the idea deserves formal consideration.

"Not all ranchers are at risk of their cattle contracting the disease and they should not shoulder the burden of brucellosis testing if there is an alternative plan available," said Kim Baker, vice president of the Montana Cattlemens Association, which has about 2,000 members statewide.

Schweitzer has favored working with the federal Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, which regulates brucellosis issues, to lay the groundwork for establishing what he calls a "hot zone" around Yellowstone National Park, where bison and elk harbor the disease.

The Cattlemens' measure is an interim policy that calls for the Montana Department of Livestock to start moving on that complicated process. If the paperwork is done before another case of brucellosis is detected in cattle, that could mean the entire state would not lose its brucellosis-free status because it could be divided into two zones.

For ranchers raising cattle in Kalispell or Alzada "you've got an awful lot of Montana between you and the park," said Cattlemens spokesman Jeremy Seidlitz.

However, the borders of the hot zone have yet to be identified.

APHIS director of veterinary services John Clifford said in a June 11 letter to Schweitzer that split-state status "is an allowable mitigation strategy" though it is a "complex and detailed process, which will require tremendous state and federal effort to complete."

At public meetings here and in Helena, local ranchers have panned the idea of a hot zone, which could require them to test for the disease every time they move animals in or out of the zone, an expensive and labor-intensive process.

The state's other major ranching group, the Montana Stockgrowers Association, strongly opposes a split-state status, said Executive Vice President Errol Rice.

Doing so would mean the defacto creation of two states, at least in terms of brucellosis control, he said, and cross-border movements would be very difficult to enforce. Plus, some animal health officials don't recognize split-state status so creating it might not do any good.

If a state loses its brucellosis-free status, all breeding age female cattle must be tested for the disease before leaving the state.

One Montana herd, near Bridger, tested positive for the disease last spring but it has been slaughtered under federal rules. If another herd tests positive within two years, the entire state loses its status, unless the split-state status is arranged first.

Rice said his group sees the disease as a statewide issue and doesn't want ranchers in distant areas to say "well, it's not my problem." He also said he doesn't want to see dissension in the

ranks of the industry, but agreed "that's what's happening" with the Cattlemens announcement.

That group's full membership still must vote on the splitstate measure.

Cattlemens also is hosting meetings this month in Miles City, Lonepine and Lewistown, all a long way from the park. Montana Board of Livestock members will attend.

Seidlitz said those locations were selected to give ranchers from around the state a voice in the matter.

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